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Gardenias

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Gardenias · *Mark Doty*

In Puerto Rico in 1939 my mother has leaned
against a garden gate, her hands in the black
dotted pockets of her dress. In one she holds
a small bitter orange she's picked today.
She is waiting for my father, who's perhaps
stopped again for gardenias at the market; his khaki truck
might be mired in this afternoon's rain.
When he does come home he will carry beside him
his leather case of tools: level and T-square,
compass, a little gray testament of trigonometric functions,
the rolled prints of a bridge, thunderhead blue.
She would like to ride on the seat
beside him, its cracked upholstery cool against
the straight seams of her hose. She watches the road,
pokes a black, strapped heel at the foot
of a clump of lilies blaring their whiteness
above the fence, taller than anything at home.
Here green is magnified, the blooms
more headily fragrant than everything she's known.
She would like him to regard her as he does his tools,
each set in place in its polished, latched case.
Instead she is part of this garden with its dense heat,
its lack of boundaries, its insistent green.
I will not be conceived for fourteen years,
though perhaps I am in some form imagined,
the outline of "son" like a vacancy
in a mural, a section the painter
has saved for last, unable to imagine
how the remaining space might be filled.
She may imagine the nimbus forms of my sister,
my shadow brother who'll die at birth.
(She will tell me where he's buried,
but I cannot remember.) What I can construct
of this scene rises from snapshots and the recollection
of snapshots. For the moment's dreamed duration,
this is the height of summer, the southern cross
already rising, not yet visible, behind the deep blue rim

of the afternoon's storm. She stands with her back
to the garden of melons and rampant mint,
dizzy as if overpowered by perfume, and leans
into the gatepost with all her weight,
her eyes closed, waiting into evening
for the truck grinding gravel at the foot of the hill.